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## Around the Americas

# 2 deny seeing arrest of slain Panama rebel

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PANAMA — In the first day of an official probe into the beheading of Hugo Spadafora, a government critic and former guerrilla, two key witnesses denied Wednesday that they had seen soldiers arrest him before his murder.

The testimony contradicted initial versions of the hours preceding Spadafora's death, damaging efforts by opposition politicians to paint the slaying as the work of the Panamanian military.

Spadafora, a 45-year-old Panamanian doctor who had fought on both sides of Nicaragua's civil war and had frequently criticized Panama's military, disappeared Friday as he traveled from San Jose to Panama.

His headless body appeared in Costa Rica within a mile of the Panama border Saturday morning.

Lawyers for Spadafora's family claimed after the murder that a bus driver and his helper had seen a Panamanian intelligence agent take Spadafora off their bus and to an army outpost 17 hours before he was found dead.

But Alexis Baules Concepcion, the 20-year-old bus driver, and Edwin Nuñez, his 23-year-old assistant, testified Wednesday that they had never even seen Spadafora. In sworn statements before an investigating judge in David, 220 miles west of Panama City, the two also denied ever having said they had seen Spadafora.

One of the Spadafora family's lawyers, Diogenes Arosemena, insisted after the court appearance that these same men had described Spadafora's arrest in earlier legal statements collected by Spadafora's brother. Arosemena suggested the witnesses had been coerced into recanting.

"There's a lot of fear in this country. If these witnesses have failed us, we have others," Arosemena said.

He said Spadafora's brother, Carmelo Jr., had talked with several other residents of Panama's western border region who had reported seeing the victim travel through the area Friday before his disappearance.

Nonetheless, Wednesday's testimony made a shambles of the family's initial version of the circumstances leading up to the slaying. It remained uncertain whether the one-time guerrilla even had crossed into Panama before he was killed. Baules and Nuñez made their statements before prosecuting Judge Carlos Espinoza in David, the capital of Panama's southwestern border province.

Border authorities have no record of Spadafora's entry into Panama, Espinoza said. Spadafora, who operated clandestinely in Costa Rica as an anti-Sandinista rebel, had frequently crossed into Panama on foot.

Spadafora's murder, which radio commentators and local journalists have loudly blamed on the defense forces, has enraged Panama's political opposition. A string of deputies have called for the resignation of defense forces chief Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega from the National Assembly floor.

The defense forces issued their first extensive statement Wednesday, lamenting the murder and asking for patience during the official investigation.

"We recognize that there were political differences between the late guerrilla activist and the defense forces," the statement said. "But given the situation, there was always the greatest tolerance."

It also pointed to Spadafora's "strong political and personal disagreements with different sectors from Central America's ideological whirlpool and from other latitudes."

As an organizer of an international brigade that fought with the Sandinistas before the 1978 victo-

ry — and more recently as an anti-Sandinista contra — Spadafora moved in circles that included not only guerrillas and arms dealers, but narcotics traffickers and double agents.

In Costa Rica, where authorities are carrying out a parallel investigation, Spadafora's closest associates ducked into hiding Wednesday, according to an American working with the contras.